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PILOT CURRICULUM PROGRAM PHASE II: 2005-2006

*Italian Heritage Curriculum: "The Universality of Italian Heritage"*

## Unit Four: Kindergarten – First Grade

### "Italian Theater: Commedia dell' Arte"

#### **Grades K-1**

*Art/Language Arts/World History/World Languages*

#### **Purpose:**

Students will be able to:

1. Create masks that will symbolize the characters of a play
2. Participate in an impromptu performance
3. Define a play as a genre of literature

This lesson plan is designed for two 45-minute periods.

#### **Materials :**

- Internet access or copies of Internet documents
- Paper plates
- Paste or glue sticks
- Scissors
- Construction paper
- String

#### **Theme:**

The "Commedia dell Arte", which in Italian means "comedy of art", or "professional comedy", was a Renaissance theatrical performance pioneered by Italian theater performers during the 1500's. Unlike opera, which is still a major segment of modern theatrical performances, the "Commedia dell Arte" is seen very seldom today. But during the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, many theatrical companies, or troupes, would put on these comical plays in temporary theaters, in royal courts and especially in city piazzas, or town squares. The performances included comical sketches, music and even dance and became popular throughout Europe during these centuries.

The "Commedia dell Arte" developed a particular theatrical style, where certain unique characters were portrayed in semi-improvised comical sketches. Costumes and especially masks were used to portray certain characters and the act involved significant amounts of physical humor – probably due to the fact that the audiences in Europe did not always understand the Italian language being used (different troupes performed in different Italian dialects) and some characters only spoke non-Italian languages (like Spanish). Performances used pre-existing storylines, but incorporated a great deal of flexibility and improvisation, often interacting or reacting to the audiences.

Through this lesson plan, students will be introduced to some of the characters of the *Commedia dell Arte*. They will learn that all of the actors developed their own specific type of character, such as the Captain, or Pantaloon and the Doctor, or the Zanni. Since the actors wore masks, their roles were eventually called *masks*. Before going on-stage, actors agree on a basic plot and a general idea of how the play should be performed. The improvised, or adlibbed performances were never subtle and were often filled with buffonery. Students will make masks and then perform part of the comedy in class.

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For further background, teachers can read a brief account of Commedia dell' Arte at web sites provided in the complete lesson plan.

### Activities:

- I. Initial steps:
  - a. Have students draw a picture of the funniest person that they know.
  - b. After 5 minutes, let some of the students share their pictures with the class.
- II. Inform the students that they are going to participate in a play. This type of play comes to us from the sixteenth century Italian Renaissance (1500s), and was still performed well into the eighteenth century (1700s) in Europe. Traveling troupes performed the *commedia dell' arte*, or the Italian comedy. Each troupe had ten or more actors. All of the actors developed their own specific type of characters, such as the Captain, Pantaloon and the Doctor (two old men), or the Zanni (valet-buffoons). Since the actors wore masks, their roles were eventually called *masks*. Men originally played all parts, but later, parts were played by females, as well.

Before going on-stage, actors agree on a basic plot and a general idea of how the play should be performed. The improvised, or “ad-libbed” performances were never subtle; the humor was often bawdy and raucous.

- III. Go to website
  - a. Scroll down to the bottom of the page.
  - b. Go to the links of characters.
  - c. Show students some of the standard characters of each show:
    - i. Point out that all actors wore a masks.
      1. The masks symbolized the Commedia dell' Arte so much that the actors' roles are called masks.
    - ii. Also, point out how one actor would play two or more characters.
- IV. Ask students to create masks, based on the standard characters in their play **and/or** masks of the funniest people they know.
  - a. They should use the pictures they created in the Initial Steps.
  - b. Students will make masks out of paper plates.
    - i. They may use markers to create symbols on their masks.
    - ii. They may use construction paper to cut out features for their masks.
      1. Students will use paste or glue sticks to put the construction paper features on the masks.
  - c. Once the students have finished their masks, tell them that the class is now going to put on a play.
- V. Tell the students that in the Commedia dell' Arte, actors would go over a general plot before they go on stage.
  - a. Ask five to seven students to develop a general plot for a play.
    - i. You may give them an example and a trial run.
      1. For example, tell students that all of the regular characters in the Commedia were turned into five and six-year-olds by a wizard.
    - ii. Give them the general disposition of the characters, as described in website
      1. The Doctor and Pantaloon were turned into five year olds and they don't know how to get their money back.
      2. Arlechino wants to trick the Doctor and Pantaloon into telling him where their money is.
      3. Mezzatino will gain the doctor's trust, then betray him and steal his money.
      4. The students could then put on a play, much like the comedians on Drew Carey's “Whose Line Is It Anyway?”
      5. They will impromptu their lines, while trying to stay in character.
      6. They must remember the other characters and the plot.

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- iii. Let two to three students appear on “stage” at a time in the trial run.
- b. Have the 3 to 4 groups of five to seven students present their plays.
  - 1. They will impromptu their lines, while trying to stay in character.
  - 2. They must remember the other characters and the plot.
- VI. Once the plays are completed:
  - a. Ask students to explain if it was hard to stay in character.
  - b. Ask them explain how they “ad-libbed” and still followed a plot.
  - c. Have students share what they think about the actors of the Commedia dell’ Arte, who had to improvise or a regular basis.